

# Northrop Frye's Legacy: Toward a Dialogic Interaction Between Literary and Cultural Studies

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**Abstract:** Discussions of Northrop Frye's work often concentrate on his four main fields of engagement: British (elite) literary studies, Canadian (postcolonial) literature, myth studies, and religion and culture. This article focuses on Frye's border-crossing literary studies and argues that, although he is seldom regarded as one of the pioneering figures of cultural studies, his work both anticipates and contributes to the field. From the perspective of a Chinese-Western comparatist, the article discusses the relationship between comparative literature studies and cultural studies, Frye's efforts to demarginalize Canadian literature, and the way Chinese scholars have enthusiastically embraced Frye. Frye's work provides contemporary comparatists, particularly those from outside the West, with a useful methodological model.

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In 2012, humanities scholars in and outside Canada celebrated the centennial of the birth of Northrop Frye, a great literary theorist and comparatist who contributed immensely to various disciplines in the humanities. As a Chinese scholar of comparative literature and cultural studies and a Frye scholar in particular, I want to raise the following questions about this great Canadian thinker and theorist, who has not only inspired my own academic research but has also greatly influenced China's literary and cultural studies: What is the significance of Frye's legacy to literary scholars today? Is Frye an old-fashioned humanist or is he still relevant to literary and cultural studies in the present global context? Given that, in the current era of globalization, literary studies are characterized by pluralistic orientations that often merge with cul-

tural studies and other disciplines, is Frye's systematic archetypal critical theory still useful, or has its critical framework become irrelevant to present studies of literature and culture? This essay will respond to the questions above from my perspective as a Chinese-Western comparatist.

### **I. Frye's Legacy Re-evaluated**

Frye's legacy, examined in scholarly projects such as *The Legacy of Northrop Frye* (1995), has been discussed primarily in terms of his four main fields of engagement: British (elite) literary studies, Canadian (postcolonial) literature,<sup>1</sup> myth studies, and religion and culture. This is, I think, far from an exhaustive summary of Frye's contributions. From today's point of view, one can say that, were Frye still alive, he surely would have been involved in debates in contemporary cultural studies and world literature, two cutting-edge fields of critical inquiry, for his theoretical framework of archetypal criticism, if innovatively translated and elaborated, lends itself well to them. When we commemorate Frye and rethink his contributions in the current global context, what demands our urgent attention are his border-crossing studies of literature, which are close to contemporary cultural studies although Frye is seldom regarded as one of the pioneering figures in the field. Before dealing with Frye's anticipation of and contribution to contemporary cultural studies, however, I will speak briefly to the dialectical relations between cultural and literary studies from my own perspective, in particular comparative literature studies.

As we all know, Frye was a literary scholar first, or more specifically, a pioneering comparatist, although he did not often use the term comparative literature. He viewed all (world) literary works, whether Western or Eastern, as part of an interconnected whole, an understanding opposed to the New Critical view that preceded him. While New Criticism emphasized close reading of individual literary texts, Frye found this method inappropriate for analyzing many literary works at the same time. That is why he was once thought of as one of the most influential theorists after the decline of New Criticism (Lentricchia 3–26). It is also why contemporary world literature scholars still cite or otherwise pay tribute to Frye's methodology (Damrosch 199).<sup>2</sup> Almost

all of his critical works deal with canonical English literature, especially Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Yeats, and T.S. Eliot. His comparative studies of literature are similar to general literary studies as he is singularly good at putting hundreds of literary works in a very broad cultural and interdisciplinary context, an approach taken in two important works: *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957) and *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982). These two works highlight links between the disciplines of literature and religion and literature and myth studies, which have often been opposed to each other. Frye's studies of literature, culture, and religion also anticipated interdisciplinary work conducted by literary scholars today. But since today's comparative literature has more or less been reconstructed to deal with the impact of cultural studies and world literature, with Frye seldom quoted or discussed even in a Western context, I will deal with this phenomenon proper before assessing Frye's contributions.

In today's global cultural context, comparatists certainly have much to contribute to the future of world culture and literature. The recent revival of world literature and its promotion and dissemination in China and the United States has proved this.<sup>3</sup> Comparative literature studies was born in Europe and, for a long time, continued to develop only within Western Europe, although it was also taught at some American universities in the latter part of the nineteenth century. It is not surprising, then, that it was dominated by Eurocentrism in its early stages. As the U.S. became a global economic, political, intellectual, and academic centre in the first half of the twentieth century, the long-standing Eurocentrism that plagued comparative literature was first broadened and eventually replaced by a form of West-centrism. Comparatists from outside the West are committed to East-West comparative studies of literature and culture but realize it is no easy job. We need not only challenge such long established Eurocentrism or West-centrism but also fight for our own literary canon to find a place in world literature. Although China is a large country with a big population, and Chinese literature has a long history and splendid heritage, it did not attract much critical attention until the recent Chinese economic boom and the popularization of Chinese language and culture.

In this respect, Frye certainly sets a fine example for those from minor or peripheral literatures and cultures, and Chinese scholars particularly appreciate what Frye has done, as Chinese literature has long been marginalized. As a comparatist from a country with a small population and a short literary history Frye was interested in demarginalizing Canadian literature and culture during the peak of Eurocentrism, and he made similar efforts for some non-Western cultures and literatures, including that of China.

In the two conclusions he wrote for Carl F. Klinck's *Literary History of Canada* (1965), Frye analyzes the idea of the "garrison mentality" and expresses hope that Canadian literature will break out of its isolated domain and open up to the world. Thanks to the great effort made by Frye as well as other writers and critics, Canadian literature has found a national and cultural identity and moved from the periphery to the centre of world literature, with such eminent Canadian writers as Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro becoming internationally renowned. In this sense, the Frygian archetypal theory, alongside Marxism and psychoanalysis, dominated the North American critical imagination in the 1960s and 1970s before it travelled to the Eastern part of the world, particularly China, where it has been favourably received.

## **II. Toward a Dialogic Tension between Literary and Cultural Studies**

In speaking of the relations between literature and culture, we cannot help but think of Frye's work. World literature has, in recent years, been a much-debated topic within the discipline of international comparative literature. The study of world literature requires a cosmopolitan view of different national literatures and cultures that resists and rejects the "garrison mentality" I refer to above. In this respect, Frye, rejecting such a "garrison mentality" from the very beginning, could be compared to Goethe, who has long been regarded as one of the forefathers of world literature. Frye's contribution, however, has not yet been recognized, an omission I will deal with shortly. The reason Goethe first conceptualized his utopian vision of world literature in 1827 was to a great extent because of the access he secured to non-Western literary works, including some Chinese texts (Wang, "Weltliteratur" 296). Although

the Chinese works Goethe read are no longer much studied in China, they played a significant role in stimulating Goethe to envision a picture of world literature that foregrounded some of the key commonalities between European and non-European literatures.

In today's consumer society, literature is no longer as popular as it once was. Despite its declining appeal in an environment saturated with numerous entertainment choices and the temptations of consumer culture, digital media, and information technology, however, literature is still able to provide a form of imaginative thought unavailable in other domains of communication. Frye attached great importance to liberal arts education, especially to teaching literature to young students. Frye's dedication to teaching and enlightening young people stemmed from his belief that they should inherit the great tradition of human culture. Nick Mount and Atwood suggest that "Frye's ideal audience" was not "critics; . . . it was the classroom, and beyond that the educated reader, a larger classroom" (70). Many of his students cultivated such a literary and aesthetic imagination after completing his courses or attending his public lectures. For him, "[t]he really penetrating artistic mind is that which probes beyond the phenomenal world behind it" ("Intoxicated with Words" 107). As an excellent teacher of literature, Frye is still universally remembered and respected by his former students and those who attended his talks. As a literary scholar, Frye opened up as broad a vision of world literature as Goethe, although, as mentioned above, Frye seldom used the term. Atwood, a former student of Frye's, argues that "Canadians always had to be international. We always have had one foot in a pond here and one foot in a pond over there because we weren't big enough to not be international" (Mount and Atwood 68). It is largely through Frye's and some others' great efforts that the relationship between Canadian and world literature has become increasingly close with some of its representatives becoming part of the canon of world literature.

It is also largely thanks to Frye's remarkable cultural and interdisciplinary perspective on literary studies that the gap between literary and cultural studies has more or less been bridged. When I first dealt with Frye's role in contemporary cultural studies,<sup>4</sup> I pointed out that Frye was among the first far-sighted cultural studies practitioners to place liter-

ary studies in the broader context of cultural studies (Wang, "Northrop Frye and Cultural Studies" 83). Although Frye's method of cultural studies was not inspired by the British cultural studies practiced by the Birmingham scholars, it is parallel to the latter. Over the course of his career, Frye was not only very much concerned with myth studies, but also had a secular concern with humankind in general, which finds best embodiment in his interest in Eastern culture and religion. With his wide range of knowledge, Frye never limited himself to writing solely for an English-speaking audience; he always wrote for a global audience. Robert Denham notes that Frye showed great interest in Eastern religions and cultures, witnessed in his "comments on Zen Buddhism in *Fearful Symmetry* at the beginning of his career [and] those on Eastern techniques of meditation in the posthumously published *Double Vision*" (3). That Frye thought it necessary for a Western scholar to be immersed in Eastern religion attests to his full appreciation and understanding of the subtleties of Eastern culture.

Frye's interest in Chinese culture and aesthetics, and the enthusiastic reception of his critical theory in China both before and after his death, means that his theoretical legacy remains huge in China. Frye once expressed his wish to visit the Eastern part of the world, particularly China, and we Chinese scholars eagerly looked forward to arranging his visit. Because of his premature death, however, his wish was left unfulfilled.<sup>5</sup> Even so Frye is one of very few Western theorists whose main works have been translated into Chinese and discussed in the Chinese context. Two international conferences devoted exclusively to Frye's literary and cultural theory have been held in China.<sup>6</sup> It is not difficult to imagine that if Frye had visited the country and spoken with Chinese scholars, he would have developed his critical theory in a more universal and cosmopolitan way.<sup>7</sup> In any event, his interest in China and references to Chinese culture and religion have inspired scholars of East-West comparative literature and culture to study his relations with the East.

As Denham points out:

Frye's published work reveals clearly that he was the product of Western culture. The references in Frye to things Eastern are,

we might imagine, only to be expected from someone with his breadth of interests. But although Frye never experienced total immersion, he did, I believe, wade more deeply into Eastern waters than his public writings suggest. His knowledge of Eastern culture, especially Eastern religion, is not inconsequential, and his interest in Buddhism and yoga was at times an intense preoccupation. (4)

Today, both Buddhism and yoga are becoming very popular in China and other Asian countries, particularly with young people. This phenomenon is obviously a reaction to the commercializing tendency of the country's contemporary consumer society. Dissatisfied with popular culture, people increasingly seek something other than material goods to fill the gap in their cultural and spiritual lives. If Eastern cultures and religions contributed to Western cosmopolitan literary and cultural theories such as those championed by Goethe and Frye, then perhaps it is time for Eastern peoples, particularly the Chinese, to learn from Western theories how to appreciate their own cultural legacies.

Like Goethe, Frye was on the one hand a nationalist and on the other, a cosmopolitan with a secular concern with the entirety of humankind and world culture. He read and understood the spirit of Eastern culture largely with the help of translation since he did not understand any Eastern languages. While Goethe's contact with Chinese literature was through his occasional access to a few Chinese literary works of minor importance, Frye's interest attests to his careful reading and adequate grasp of three essentials of Chinese literature and culture: *Book of Odes* (*Shi jing*), which is the oldest Chinese literary work; *Dao De Jing* by Laozi, the founder of Daoist philosophy; and Chinese calligraphy (Wu 150–53). Frye's writings repeatedly cite these three elements of Chinese literature and culture, which is by no means accidental as people might imagine.

Frye's relations with Chinese culture and literature proceed in two directions: classical Chinese literature and culture inspired him and, to some extent, helped establish his systematic body of myth-archetypal critical theory. In turn, his theory travelled to China through translation and critical introduction and inspired contemporary Chinese literary

critics and scholars to modernize the country's comparative literature and literary theory studies. The translation of Frye's works into Chinese started as early as the latter part of the 1980s, though the systematic introduction and translation of his critical and theoretical works did not begin until after the first international conference held in Beijing in 1994. Frye died in 1991, but through the translation of and critical introduction to his works done by Chinese scholars, he has had, to borrow Walter Benjamin's terms, a "continued life" and "afterlife" (73) in the Chinese context.

An anthropological approach is one of the major orientations in contemporary Chinese comparative literature studies. Scholars in this sub-field are well-equipped with various anthropological theories, including Frye's myth-archetypal theory. That is one of the reasons why Chinese scholars have primarily thought of Frye as a theorist of myth-archetypal criticism rather than as a cultural theorist. For scholars like myself, however, this critical reception is a bit misleading, for what remains particularly useful to literary and cultural studies as well as global and interdisciplinary studies in China is what Frye wrote as a cultural theorist and comparatist. His general methodology of putting hundreds of literary works together for critical examination is closer to the approach of world literature studies, and his border-crossing and interdisciplinary comparisons of literature and other branches of knowledge such as culture, folklore, myth, and religion, are the major reasons contemporary cultural studies scholars make constant reference to him. His works suggest a sort of tension between (elite) English literature and (postcolonial) Canadian literature, between (high) cultural theory and (popular) folklore cultural practice, and between literary studies and religious studies. One can argue that these tensions indicate the complexity and richness of Frye's legacies.<sup>8</sup>

### **III. Writing in an Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Way**

In today's context of globalization, scholars of comparative literature are greatly concerned that many issues dealt with in cultural studies seem to be only distantly related to literary studies in a traditional sense and that much of literary theory, whose "golden age" is "long past" according to



Terry Eagleton (1), is viewed as "cultural theory." Faced with this challenge, literary scholars have more reason to appreciate that Frye wrote about literary studies in a border-crossing and sometimes cross-cultural way. Frye often noticed that some critics and schools of criticism emphasize the cultural aspect of a work over the literary, or vice versa. In his view both the literary and cultural are equally essential and reciprocally constitutive. For Frye, "criticism will always have two aspects, one turned toward the structure of literature and one turned toward the . . . cultural phenomena that form the social environment of literature" (Frye, *Critical Path* 25). He never neglects the social and cultural importance of literary criticism even when emphasizing the formal aspects of a literary work. This is why his texts have had a wide audience, even after his death. Literary studies are currently being challenged for dominance by cultural studies, which are increasingly oriented towards popular culture and which have certainly threatened traditional comparative literature as a discipline. It is no surprise that some traditional comparative literature scholars are apprehensive about the future of literary studies, which have been tremendously impacted by cultural studies. Worse still, the discipline of comparative literature has often been reported "dead." Such artificial opposition between literary and cultural studies may be eliminated if we follow Frye's practice of combining literary and cultural studies in a broad context.

When I suggest that Frye remains relevant to both literary and cultural studies, I simply mean that he never tried to get rid of cultural factors even in his most formalistically oriented works. Ian Balfour pertinently notes that "[o]f the great critics of the twentieth century Frye was one of the most committed to the democratic ideals of a broad intelligibility and accessibility when it comes to culture" (51). Culture is foregrounded in his written works and in his "teaching and lecturing" to broader audiences (51). Frye is often viewed mainly as a literary formalist, but he never neglected to lay considerable emphasis on the social function of literature. As Alvin Lee observes:

[H]e is unlike the practitioners of cultural materialism, cultural studies, and cultural poetics; he is able successfully to follow a

middle way between social determinism, on the one hand, and aesthetic indeterminacy, on the other. He always recognizes the tension that exists between the social function of literature and its aesthetic integrity and is able to write successfully about both. (Lee xiv)

The role Frye played in contemporary cultural studies can be compared to that of F.R. Leavis, who is generally recognized as a foundational figure in British cultural studies despite his elite sense of literary and cultural theory. Frye's interest in culture, however, is much broader than Leavis'; for Leavis, culture is always in the hands of a few elite intellectuals. Frye, however, pays particular attention to folkloric writing and other non-canonical literary texts. Raymond Williams has also been very well received in China, but he does not refer to the Chinese context in his discussion of the relationship between Marxism and literature. His work is largely confined to Western Marxism, which is very different from the practice of Chinese Marxism or a sort of "Sinicized" Marxism. Conservative Maoist Chinese Marxists do not regard Williams as a real Marxist. Although contemporary cultural studies are very popular in China and Williams is frequently quoted and discussed by Chinese scholars, so far no international conferences have been devoted to him and his work.<sup>9</sup> Since Frye always stands in "a middle way between social determinism" and "aesthetic indeterminacy"—that is, neither Marxist nor formalist—he has been more easily received by Chinese literary critics and scholars. As the popularity of cultural studies has risen in China, however, Williams has become more and more attractive to those engaged in Birmingham School-style cultural studies.

If Leavis and Williams remain influential in Western and Chinese academia, especially in cultural studies, then it should be noted that they regrettably failed to express any interest in Eastern culture, including Chinese culture, although they were frequently quoted and discussed in Eastern countries, including China. Unlike these two British scholars, however, Frye was not only interested in Eastern culture and religion, he often quoted from Eastern cultural and religious works, particularly from Chinese cultural texts and Buddhism. In this sense, then,

Frye's theoretical doctrine transcends the narrow-minded Eurocentric or West-centric mode of thinking.

How, then, is Frye's theory significant to contemporary comparative literature and cultural studies? The recent revival of world literature has once again attracted the attention of comparatists not only in the West but also in China as well as other Eastern countries such as Korea, India, and Turkey. Although Frye's works do not explicitly address world literature, his persistent interest in Eastern culture and literature suggests that he was dissatisfied with the Eurocentric or West-centric mode of world literature. Since he wanted to share his critical theory with audiences across the world, he was very much concerned with literature and culture beyond the West, which underlies his significance in the age of globalization: his work contributes to increasing connections and exchanges between different national literatures and cultures. According to the implicit logic of Frye's theoretical positions, individual national literatures cannot be discussed productively without an examination of their relations with other literatures and cultures.

Frye's critical theory and practice also foregrounds the interdependence between literary and cultural studies. As Gayatri Spivak suggests, the old comparative literature with its Eurocentric mode of thinking needed to die out; a new comparative literature has already come into being. This "New Comparative Literature" crosses "borders" and works with "area studies" (15–16). In much the same way, Frye crossed borders between literature and religion and literature and culture. When we celebrate the birth of this "New Comparative Literature" and call for dialogues between literary and cultural studies, we should never forget to acknowledge Frye's foundational role. His works not only anticipate the advent of "New Comparative Literature" but also provide us with a methodological model.

## Notes

- 1 Critics have long debated whether Canada should be regarded as a postcolonial country. For instance, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* positions both Canada and the U.S. as postcolonial countries (2), whereas Moss' *Is Canada Postcolonial?* argues against using the term in relation to Canada.

- 2 In contemporary theoretical discussions of world literature, Damrosch and Spivak, respectively, mention Frye's contributions (Spivak, "Plenarity" 215; Damrosch 199).
- 3 Two international conferences on world literature were held in Beijing and Shanghai in August 2010 and July 2011, respectively, and an institute of world literature was established at Harvard University in 2010 under the direction of Damrosch.
- 4 I first delivered my keynote speech entitled "Northrop Frye and Cultural Studies" at the Hoh-Hot symposium on Northrop Frye studies in 1999. It was later revised and published in *Northrop Frye: Eastern and Western Perspectives* (2003).
- 5 Before I went to Europe to do research in 1990, I was asked by my colleague at Peking University, Yue Daiyun, whether we would like to arrange for Frye's lecture tour to China. I gave my full support to the proposal and offered to contact Frye after my return from Europe in August 1991. Sadly, Frye passed away on January 23, 1991, while I was still in Europe.
- 6 I was actively involved in both conferences. The International Conference on Northrop Frye: China and the West was co-organized by Peking University and Victoria University in the University of Toronto in July 1994 in Beijing, and the International Symposium on Northrop Frye Studies was organized by Inner Mongolia University in July 1999 in Hoh-Hot, also in collaboration with Victoria University. I served as a keynote speaker for both events and as the general organizer for the first conference.
- 7 We can imagine that, had Frye had the opportunity to exchange views with Chinese scholars, he would have found it surprising that they were very interested in both Eastern and Western ancient myths. Thus they are naturally interested in his theory and had hoped he would discuss some Chinese literary texts in his work. Unfortunately, Frye never analyzed any single Chinese literary work from his myth-archetypal critical perspective.
- 8 Western scholars might be curious as to why Frye has been so enthusiastically received by a country whose cultural tradition is entirely different from that of Canada. Some of my Chinese colleagues may well think that the Canadian government has promoted Frye studies in China since the early 1980s. It is true if we just think about the reception of Frye's theory in the 1980s and 1990. Apart from the financial support offered by the Canadian government to China's Frye studies and our own enthusiastic promotion, two other factors are at play. First, Frye does not belong to any particular critical school—his significance is more than equal to a critical school. Second, Frye's works have bridged the gap between literary and cultural studies and comparative and world literature, and this also characterizes China's comparative literature studies over the past few years. That is why he is not out of date even today. One interesting thing I should add here: When I was preparing this essay, which I first presented as a talk at a conference held in Toronto entitled "Educating the Imagination: A Conference

in Honour of Northrop Frye on the Centenary of His Birth" (October 2012), some of my then-colleagues at the National Humanities Center in Chapel Hill made fun of me, saying "Why do you spend so much time writing about such an out-of-date old Canadian humanist?"

- 9 Although no international conference has so far been devoted to Williams, a few PhD dissertations dealing with Williams have been produced in China. I supervised a PhD dissertation on Williams and cultural studies by He Weihua of Tsinghua University (2011) and reviewed another on Williams' Marxist theory by Fu Degen of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (2000).

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